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# What factors influence positive father involvement in African American families?

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WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE POSITIVE FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES?

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the degree of  
Master of Science

In  
The School of Human Ecology

By  
Courtney Pitts  
B.S., Louisiana State University, 2006  
May 2012

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the four most important men in my life. My father, Joseph Pitts, has set a remarkable example of what a father should be. I am appreciative of the foundation you have set for my siblings and me. My brother, Brandon Pitts, who is my inspiration and encourages me to go the extra mile in everything I do. And to my nephews, Keelan and Korey, my prayer is that you grow into strong, powerful, Black men and become generative fathers and help the next generation do the same.

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## **ABSTRACT**

While positive fathers appear to be a myth in African American communities among current research, this study looks at the common factors among involved fathers in inner city neighborhoods. In a secondary analysis of interviews from happily married Black couples in inner city neighborhoods, overlapping themes emerge exploring the reasons behind positive involvement among fathers. In twenty-two interviews, both husbands and wives explain reasons for continuous father involvement in the lives of their children. Findings include a heavy reliance on faith, marital support and commitment to matrimony and value of responsibility to one's family. Future research and implications should address standards set by highly involved fathers and establish programs to help other fathers become more involved.

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Children who experience positive paternal involvement are more likely to perform better academically, are less likely to participate in delinquent behavior further, they obtain better social skills and interaction (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Mullins, 2010). Fathers are referred to as sources of help, advice, and moral support from children and teenagers who feel close to their fathers (Amato, 1994). Children are not the only beneficiaries. According to Rob Palkovitz, “Fathering roles create a rich and pervasive context for men’s adult development. Good fathering is good for everyone” (2002, p. 5). Father involvement influences other roles that men may engage in such as husband or community leader (Palkovitz, 2002).

Communities continue to benefit from having strong fathers in place. History provides examples of strong ties in African American<sup>1</sup> families with a father and his children. During slavery, some fathers were known to have purchased their wives’ freedom to ensure that their children would also be freed, even before the men freed themselves (Allen & Connor, 1997). In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans experienced segregation and endured harder times as they attempted to access voting polls, schools and employment (Allen & Connor, 1997). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, fathers in the African American community continue to face many challenges to becoming responsible fathers such as lack of employment and education opportunities, institutional racism and other factors (Marks et al., 2010). Many times, however, black fathers are involved and caring for their families.

There are many benefits for father involvement. Early influences on father involvement are associated with higher cognitive functioning and academic achievement in children (Brotherson & White, 2007). In the 1960s, there was a heavy increase in research of fathers’ influence in their children’s development by psychoanalysts, social learning theorists, and

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<sup>1</sup> African American and Black will be used interchangeably.

researchers using structural functionalist approaches (Day, Lewis, O'Brien & Lamb, 2005). Historical research depicts fathers as providers for the family sharing little contact and involvement with children (Palkovitz, 2002). In the body of fathering literature, researchers often present data that draw negative attention to fathers, especially in African American households (Bigner, 2006). Instead of exploring father-child relationships and positive outcomes for children in African American families, researchers have tended to associate a child's well-being with the payment of child support from nonresidential fathers (Bigner, 2006). Topics such as matriarchal families, stereotypes concerning fatherless children, abuse of welfare and high rates of illegitimate children have all been repeatedly addressed in African American family research. Much research and media draws attention to the "absent father" in African American households and focuses on poverty and challenges related a declining familial structure (Allen & Connor, 1997). This approach has been referred to as a "deficit perspective" (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997).

Over the past twenty years, researchers have suggested that many Black fathers are expressive, generative and highly involved in the socialization of their children (Livingston & McAdoo, 2007). Further, many black men are not only involved fathers – several serve as role models, coaches, mentors and surrogate fathers to other children and youth in addition to their own (Marsiglio, 2008). These fathers and surrogate fathers help plant seeds of service and model direction to better opportunities for young men and women. Fathers who are secure in their identity can offer benefits to a community by preparing the next generation of Black men, and women through engaging in generative fathering role (Caldwell & White, 2006). Generative fathers assist in meeting the needs of children's development and helping to foster the growth of the next generation. Generative fathering is a social demand placed on fathers within

communities (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). These fathers care for their biological children as well as other children in their community and neighborhood by giving guidance, discipline and support (Caldwell & White, 2006). Fathers in this generative role provide for their children by committing themselves to their fulfilling responsibilities, creating opportunities for growth and development and caring to see the next generation be healthy and productive (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). These generative black fathers warrant attention and serve as the focus and concern of this thesis.



## CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Theoretical Framework**

The development of fatherhood can be expressed through Erikson's psychosocial theory (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). Eight stages of development from childhood to adulthood outlined by Erik Erikson depict *crises* individuals face as they mature. The success of each crisis depends on the behavior and social environment of the individual. Social forces such as parenting, instruction and other influences contribute to success in each stage of development. Parents are the first caregivers for children and the earlier stages are important to an individual's development. "The first six years are when the template for later life is set down" (Doherty, 2000, p. 43).

Fatherhood can have an impact on each stage of development, especially during childhood and adolescence. As fathers provide support for their children's basic needs and continuity of care, they help children develop a sense of trust and confidence (Erikson, 1997). During infancy, without healthy communication and interaction with caregivers, children may have difficulty trusting the world (Erikson, 1997). In the second stage of development, autonomy versus doubt, fathers can balance between permissiveness and overprotection to help a child develop healthy independence (Erikson, 1997). Children, who are offered both freedom and limitations, tend to foster independence and control over their behavior. In the initiative versus guilt stage, when children are around four to five years old, fathers help with development by allowing their children to develop their own sense of responsibility (Erikson, 1997). Children move from being able to accomplish tasks on their own to taking pride in their achievements. Fathers assist by providing encouragement and opportunity (Salkind, 2004).

During childhood and adolescence, individuals master social skills and become industrious and begin to define their futuristic interests, including those related to education and careers. Adolescence is central in Eriksonian theory and identity is the crisis of this stage. Identity is “the unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character” (Miller, 1983, p. 159).

During early adulthood, an individual begins to focus on relationships and feelings of others. An individual begins to enter serious committed relationships which produce intimacy. Intimacy is successful when an individual gives him/herself to someone else. Many young adults who achieve true intimacy contemplate marriage and children (Erikson, 1997). If an individual is secure in their feelings and previous stages have been successful, the resolved results of this intimacy stage can often culminate in marriage and family. The basic strength within the intimacy stage is “love” (Erikson, 1997). There must be a secure level of trust, understanding, and warmth already established before completing this stage and moving to the next (Salkind, 2004).

Stage seven, a focal concern of this thesis, involves the crisis or challenge of generativity versus stagnation as adults mature. Adults face the decision to care for the members of the younger generation that surrounds them. Generative fathers are involved and concerned with making a better environment for their children and children of others. When these fathers reach this potential they resolve the generativity versus stagnation crisis by expressing concern for the generation that will follow through action and sacrifice (Miller, 1983). Generativity can be linked to African American men as they develop a sense of responsibility and connectedness to the rising generation (Allen & Connor, 1997). While men must acquire motivations, skills, energy, interaction and availability, generative fathering also includes competence, commitment,

and responsibility (Allen & Connor, 1997). Negative messages about one's ability to be involved must be overcome in order for African American men to act as successful members of their families (Allen & Connor, 1997).

### **A Conceptual View of Generative Fathering**

Erik Erikson (1997) is responsible for coining and developing the concept of *generativity*. Generativity is related to a parent's personal growth and psychosocial maturation as their own children develop (Connor & White, 2006). Generative fathering refers to the nurturance of life from one generation to the next fostered by the men within a family (Connor & White, 2006). These fathers harbor strong feelings of care for their children and believe their families are most important (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). Since most men are hard workers by nature, it is easy to conceive the idea of generative fathering as "work" because generative fathers involves men working for their families and fulfilling their personal responsibilities to care for the next generation (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). Fathers face the responsibilities to commit to the responsibility of caring for the next generation and developing a role in the lives of their children in the process (Dollahite, Hawkins & Brotherson, 1997).

Fathers who foster close bonds with their children have better teaching and communicating skills with children (King et al., 2004). Recent research tells us that father involvement offers men a sense of self and importance. Forste, Bartkowski, and Jackson (2009) explored relationships with fathers through 36 qualitative interviews of low-income African American and Native American men. Fathers referred to relationships with their own fathers as an influence for understanding their responsibilities as a father. Most of the interviewed men were not close to their fathers and discussed other role models when explaining father-related terminology, while others described their own fathers as committed, good listeners and caring.

Men with generative fathers described positive, nurturing characteristics of their fathers that encouraged them to become active dads as well. Men who were not close to their fathers depended on other male role models. As they sought to provide and offer support to their families, they avoided the picture of fatherhood that their own dad left for them and created their own (Forste, Bartkowski, & Jackson, 2009).

Family researchers question whether fathers' reports are reliable when investigating paternal involvement. Wical and Doherty (2005) found that fathers reports of their involvement mimics reports made by mothers in observing the fathers' interaction. More than 100 couples completed diaries explaining a typical work day and non-work day for their families requested by researchers. The researchers then compared fathers' reports of involvement to the mothers' report of the fathers' involvement (Wical & Doherty, 2005). Diaries were coded with respect to "engaged interaction" and "accessibility." In both categories, there were only a few minutes of difference between mothers' and fathers' reports. After correcting for reports where mothers were not able to openly see fathers interacting with their children, similarities between reports further increased (Wical & Doherty, 2005).

Men are expected to behave differently when caring for, nurturing and raising a child, and becoming a generative father. This transition can be a significant development force in men's lives (Palkovitz, 2002). Men who actively parent appear to show more social-cognitive development, are more likely to positively change their health habits (e.g. smoking, drinking drugs, etc.) than their peers who are not fathers (Palkovitz, 2002). This commitment to their children is an ongoing set of decisions across time in the lives of involved fathers (Palkovitz, 2002). The bidirectional influence between father and child development creates opportunities to grow cognitively, emotional, physically and in their personality as well (Palkovitz, 2002).

As children develop and their needs decrease, their independence increases. Accordingly, fatherhood development changes and men must adjust and adapt to the roles they must provide and fill in later stages (Palkovitz, 2002). The definition of “role” is culturally different and has individual meaning according to behaviors.

Minton and Pasley (1996) conducted a questionnaire of 303 middle-aged, White, highly educated, middle income fathers and their parenting role in child related activities. These researchers found that the more competent and satisfied the father was in their role, the more involved they tended to be with their children. The positive relationship between a father’s competence and his involvement in child-related activities was stronger for divorced non-resident fathers (Minton & Pasley, 1996). Role theory assumes that people will act in a certain manner depending on the identities that they have created for themselves (Minton & Pasley, 1996). This study concluded that marital status was a strong predictor of involvement.

Fathers’ responsiveness to their children seems to promote important fundamentals of children’s development and also helps fathers develop as adults (Ashbourne, Daly, & Brown, 2011). In interviews collected from 215 fathers in Canada examining how children influence fathers, Ashbourne, Daly, and Brown (2011) recorded fathers’ responsiveness through attention and interaction with their children. Fathers offered anecdotes about being present at the time of nurturing and disciplining tasks as well as discussing shared activities and teaching. Fathers also offered insight on being responsive throughout the child’s development, and emphasized the importance of understanding the child (Ashbourne, Daly, & Brown, 2011). Fathers identified their own intentions, priorities, and values of parenting their children and explained how these influenced their responsiveness in interaction (Ashbourne, Daly & Brown, 2011). Researchers reported fathers’ responsiveness as father’s attention and focus on their children, reference to

future connection and development of the child, knowledge of individual development needs of the children and acknowledgement of their own personal growth and maturity as fathers (Ashbourne, Daly & Brown, 2011). These Canadian responses are similar to findings in studies conducted in the United States.

Cooksey and Fondell (1996) similarly explored how fathers spent time with their children and what encouraged them to do so. Fathers responded to questions regarding the amount of time they spent with the focal child (between the age of 5 and 18) and the focal child's grades in school. In families where fathers lived with their biological children, fathers reported that they spent more time with children. Single fathers rated second in terms of time spent in activities with their children and social fathers (extending themselves to other children besides their own biological children) were reported as having the least involvement of all groups. Results also showed that Black fathers were more likely than White fathers to spend time talking to their children, reading and helping children with homework. Consistent with previous research, those who performed better in school tended to come from two-parent, biological families (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996). Optimally developing children also tended to have fathers who shared meals with them, spend time with them, and assisted with homework or reading (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996).

Fathers can also help motivate other men to become active fathers in their families. Father figures serve as mentors to those in the community. By acting as an influence and offering guidance and advice, fathers become mentors by helping children (and other men) reach their goals (Pleban & Diez, 2007). Whether in informal settings like mentoring friends of their own children or in more organized settings such as youth ministry, coaches of community sports teams or employees of juvenile institutions, generative males act as social fathers to children

(Marsiglio, 2008). While children benefit from father involvement, men also contribute to public services such as childcare, welfare, and youth corrections courts (White, 2007). African American men can change a community by building the next generation of African American men (Caldwell & White, 2007). Black men who serve as social fathers are admired by most people within the African American community (Caldwell & White, 2007).

### **African American Fathers**

Fatherhood can act as a catalytic transition into adulthood for men in the African American community (Caldwell & White, 2006). African American men have an uneasy task of balancing society's gender norms with cultural expectations (Allen & Connor, 1997). Generative fathers combine interaction, availability, and responsibility with motivation, skills, energy and competence in order to provide the best care for their families (Allen & Connor, 1997). Black fathers place importance on spending time with their children, providing emotional support, providing discipline, being a role model and providing financial support (Hamer, 2001). As mentioned previously, Black fathers face many challenges such as socioeconomic standing, family arrangement, physical conditions, and lack of employment opportunities that may hinder them from economically providing for their families (Allen & Connor, 1997; Hamer, 2001). In African American culture, the extended family often plays a major role in the responsibility of children and educating young men (Caldwell & White, 2006).

Empirical studies on African American men have explored the level of involvement and activities fathers participated in with their children. King, Harris and Heard (2004) examined the surveys of more than five thousand adolescents who participated in a National Longitudinal Study of Adolescents. Analyzing nonresidential father involvement, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family history, researchers concluded that Black adolescents had the

highest rate of attending religious services with their fathers. Black adolescents also reported higher frequency of working on school projects with their fathers (King et al. 2004). These teenagers reported being closer to their fathers than did Whites, Hispanics, and Asians (King et al., 2004). Father involvement helps motivate academic achievement, better school performance and better cognitive development.

Nonresidential fathers have difficulty having visits with their children due to myriad factors including parent conflict and geographic distance. In a study conducted by Leite and McHenry (2006), 119 separated and divorced African American fathers reported on surveys their level of involvement with their children under the age of 18. Results revealed that low levels of father involvement with children, were related to ongoing conflict with residential mothers, greater geographic distance from children, and lack of clarity of their roles as father (Leite & McHenry, 2006). Those fathers who had more visits with their children were more likely to view their father role as very important. The same study also concluded that fathers are more likely to be involved when they experience lower conflict with the mother (Leite & McHenry, 2006.) Research on positive fatherhood involvement in African American households across contexts is still limited.

### **Maternal Influences**

Kin networks are essential in Black families for raising and taking care of all members of the family, especially the rearing of young children (Caldwell & White, 2007; Perry 2009). Maternal support is seen as a significant predictor of paternal involvement. Young fathers who receive support from the mothers of their children tend to be involved more (Perry, 2009). In African American culture, the extended family and support system of the mother sometimes



create tension between the roles of the parents. Further, men's self-esteem can be affected by the quality of the parental relationship (Allen & Connor, 1997).

Many African American parents adopt a more authoritarian parenting style; and this style has been used to explain variations in academic achievement, psychological well-being and other benefits to children (Livingston & McAdoo, 2007). Black families' authoritarian parenting styles places strong emphasis on discipline and control but is related to fewer behavioral problems and better grades in Black households (Livingston & McAdoo, 2007).

During forty-five minute qualitative interviews with 38 Black noncustodial fathers, Hamer (2001) found that men who were closely connected to their children's mother viewed themselves as better fathers. Black men who maintained friendly relationships with the mothers of their children were better able to have contact with their children, while fathers who viewed the child's mother as an antagonist had little contact with (and little social and emotional support to offer to) their children. Fathers further disclosed that they wanted to have more interaction with their children but encountered many barriers such as the maternal family's intervention (Hamer, 2001).

Other research that addresses maternal influences on father involvement include McBride and Rane's (1998) exploratory quantitative study interviewing approximately 90 White, middle class families about parental responsibility and family structures. Parents were interviewed and given questionnaires and asked to report their daily activities on target days. Mothers and fathers reported ways they shared responsibilities related to their children (McBride & Rane, 1998). Partners were unable to hear each other's responses. Researchers found that mothers believed that marital quality had an impact on father involvement. When mothers' perceptions of parenting matched that of their spouses, father involvement tended to be higher (McBride &

Rane, 1998). Also, mothers' perception of their spouses' confidence in parenting also related to higher paternal involvement. In summary, assessments of a positive parenting alliance proved to be a strong predictor of father involvement (McBride & Rane, 1998).

Other research similarly indicates that maternal influences are related to levels of father involvement. In a study with 3,319 ten – fourteen year old of female youth, Pleck and Hofferth (2008) found that mothers who possessed positive attitudes concerning their partner's involvement are linked to high levels of involvement from the fathers. When mothers expected fathers to be involved, this expectation related to high levels of involvement from the fathers; fathers also tended to model the level of involvement of female partners (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008). Pleck and Hofferth further concluded that high marital conflict or (in post-divorce families) presence of stepfather are related to lower father involvement. The study concluded that mother influence had a direct influence on father involvement (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008).

Waller and Swisher (2006) suggest that maternal gatekeeping is a barrier to fathers being vital roles of their children's lives. In a related review, the authors concluded, "A woman's expectations, attitudes, and ideas about fatherhood make a difference to fathers." (Holmes et al. 2007). Mothers have an influence on fathers' interaction and engagement in activities with their children. Caldwell and White (2006) similarly found that mother-father relationships are important predictors of father involvement and that fathers who have positive relationships with the mothers of the child tend to have better interactions and are more involved with the offspring (Caldwell & White, 2006). Holmes et al. (2007) also discussed that when marriages involve higher satisfaction, fathers are more likely to be involved and to report having better experiences as fathers. The authors also concluded that fathers, who feel more confident in their parenting skills and their roles, are more likely to stay involved (Holmes et al, 2007).

## **Marriage**

Prominent fathering scholar Doherty (1998) has contended that “Fathering cannot be defined in isolation from mothering or mothers’ expectation and social expectations about childrearing in society” (p. 278). Goddard (2007) likewise suggests that healthy marriages provide a safe place for children to learn about relationships. As some marriage therapists recommend, strengthening marriage is also beneficial to fathering. Mothers are happier in their marriages when they receive positive fatherhood involvement from their spouses (Palkovitz, 2002). Men who focus on giving their internal and external resources to their spouses and children are also happier than those who are more self-absorbed (Palkovitz, 2002). When couples are synchronized in their beliefs about childrearing and family commitments, marital satisfaction increases (Palkovitz, 2002). Further, in marital relationships, children reportedly act as a deterrent for parents when considering divorce (Kalmijn, 1999).

Father roles are based on traditional views of a marital context, where mothers are caregivers and fathers are financial providers (Hamer, 2001). In a study of marriage and fathering, Yeung et al. (2001) gathered interviews from a sample of 2,400 families with children ages 0 through 12 who lived with both biological parents throughout the United States. Diaries reporting the children’s activities within a day were completed by members of the family. Researchers explored both the paternal engagement and accessibility. Activity categories included personal care, play and companionship, achievement-related, household, social, and other (school, sleep, etc.). Conclusions indicated that children spend a greater amount of their time with fathers in play and companionship than they do in personal care activities. Researchers also found that paternal involvement tended to decrease as child’s age increase (Yeung et al., 2001). Fathers were also more engaged with play and routine personal care with

younger children. Although fathers spend only about one third of the time reading and participating in educational play as mothers, fathers spent more time in active play and leisure time than mothers. Overall, children's time with their fathers is 80 – 94% of their time with their mothers in two parent households (Yeung et al., 2001).

In a secondary analysis of surveys completed by Households in the Netherlands, Kalmijn (1999) collected 563 personal interviews and questionnaires from married and cohabiting couples. The researchers found that married fathers are more involved with childrearing duties than nonresident fathers. Fathers' bonds with their children strengthen the bond between the husband and wife in married households (Kalmijn, 1999). Exploring father's contributions to childrearing and perceived marital stability, this study also found that fathers with a more traditional approach to sex roles are less involved in childrearing. Also, highly educated men participated more in childrearing than men with less education (Kalmijn, 1999). Fathers who were more involved in childrearing reported having more stable marriages. When wives reported more satisfaction with their spouse's involvement with the children, both reported as having more stability in their marriage (Kalmijn, 1999). Although, this study was conducted with participants living in the Netherlands, the results are similar to findings from studies in the United States.

### **Child Outcomes**

Fathers' level of involvement can be important to children's development (Palkovitz, 2002). Foster & Kalil (2007) compared the cognitive development and emotional adjustment across living arrangements for preschool children (Foster & Kalil, 2007). When living arrangements were compared across races, Black families proved to have more mother-only households where a social father was present or there was no father at all (Foster & Kalil, 2007).

Common patterns included grandparents in multigenerational families and fathers being replaced by other men (Foster & Kalil, 2007). Findings indicated that externalizing problems were higher for Black children in blended families than for children than those living with their mother only (Foster & Kalil, 2007). Black children living with their biological father showed higher scores in the PPVT (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test), an instrument used to assess vocabulary performance as compared to those living in mother-only households (Foster & Kalil, 2007).

In other work, father involvement has been associated with fewer behavioral problems (Carlson, 2006). Adolescents of actively involved fathers reported having fewer externalizing behaviors. Across all measures (mother involvement, gender of child, etc.) father involvement followed a linear pattern of less behavioral problems participated in by adolescent (Carlson, 2006).

Further research is needed on the support system of African American families as suggested by Tucker, Subramanian and James (2004). Holmes and Huston (2007) also suggest looking at different ways in which fathers interact with their children. Further research concerning father involvement as it relates to external behaviors, academic performance, and socialization are recommended for examining the lives of children, fathers and their families in the African American community. Although there is some research that has begun to examine the lives of residential, African American fathers, there is still much to know.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the literature on African American families, fathers are portrayed as missing figures and Black fathers tend to be portrayed in a more negative light than White fathers (Caldwell & White, 2006). Focal topics in the literature include absent fathers, external maternal kinship care and increased incarceration rates. Each of these topics neglects the reality of residential African

American fathers and their contributions to their families and their communities (Coles & Green, 2010). While it is necessary to investigate these struggles, challenges and the diverse family structures that are present in the African American community, little research has examined residential African American men and their positive involvement with their children and families.

Census statistics of 2010 show that only fifteen percent of African American household include married adults as parents which is the lowest of all racial groups; however 41% of black children live with their fathers (including either married, cohabiting and single dads) (Coles & Green, 2006). Unemployment, poverty, instability, incarceration and lack of child support gain a significant amount of research and attention from media and social researchers (Coles & Green, 2006). Barriers to marriage in African American communities include lack of employment and educational opportunities. Men face challenges as they assume the role of provider for their families. In summary, researchers typically present data that draws negative attention to fathers in African American households (Bigner, 2006).

Recent research has begun to explore factors that influence father involvement in African American households (Marks et al., 2010). This is encouraging to some, given the lack of research on the positive family experiences of African American men in families and relationships (Allen & Connor, 1997).

## **CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

Thirty interviews from African American couples in multiple cities throughout all regions in the United States were obtained and analyzed to explore themes and predictors of healthy, happy, enduring marriages by Dr. Loren Marks and colleagues. Eleven (N= 22 individuals) of those thirty have been included in this study. These couples were identified and recruited by community leaders (i.e. pastors, community activists) who recognized them as “strong stable marriages.” Interviews have been collected over the past decade (from 2001 – 2011). Eighty percent (24 of 30) of participants lived in inner-city neighborhoods. Participants ranged in ages from 42-75 with an average marriage length of 26 years. All couples reported having “dual earner” households for the majority of their married life. Ninety percent of the couples told interviewers they were moderately to highly religious (Marks et al., 2008). Average income per household was about \$58,000. The average number of children was less than 3. Children ages ranged from 7 to 49 (Marks et al., 2008). The researcher used these 11 (N = 22 individuals) interviews from mothers and fathers to identify themes that relate to direct father child involvement. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by a member of the Marks et al. research project related to happy, healthy strong marriages. This analysis of qualitative data will focus on the parents’ responses of how fathers interact with, communicate with, and influence their children.

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded theory allows ideas to grow from responses within the interviews conducted by researchers (Singleton & Straits, 2010). While Erikson’s life span (particularly the generativity

stage) offers a theoretical foundation for the study, grounded theory allows different additional themes to emerge as interviews are open coded for concepts. Grounded theory offers significant theory-observation compatible research that can be generalized, reproduced and verified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Emerging themes from mothers and fathers interviews are discussed in Chapter 4 and are viewed as meaningful and significant as it appeared across multiple interviews.

Open coding consisted of line by line analysis of interviews from multiple family members (husband and wife). Analyzing both mother and father interviews offered various perspective on family life within the household. Codes have been given to identify recurring themes. I have analyzed all interview responses to explore father involvement from men in strong stable marriages in African American households. Influences on father involvement includes father's background and childhood, religious beliefs, maternal (partner) encouragement, generative fathering concerns and leaving a legacy for children and grandchildren. Codes have been given to various themes related to father involvement and paternal care giving. Recurring themes have been summarized to present a collective view of father's involvement in the strong happy marriages. Originally there were 7 themes that were combined to reflect more dominant themes such as religious reliance, maternal and marital influence and acknowledgement of father responsibilities.

### **Reflexivity**

I am an African American Christian raised in a two parent household where my mother and father were a major part of my development. Because of my personal beliefs and experience, there may be an expectation for me to view valuable information among these parents.



However; I am not married nor a parent so my insider disposition extends to a certain boundary. Themes that are presented in my findings are represented across the interviews that I have analyzed.

### **Credibility**

“Peer debriefing can involve sharing one’s evolving attempts at describing and analyzing qualitative data to achieve some kind of consensual validation” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 188).

Transcriptions were conducted prior to my analytical interpretation, so I have read each interview’s reported words. Multiple coders have analyzed each interview in order to decrease bias of a single researcher’s discovery and increase reliability across the study. Data audits among other peers in this field of research have been invited to analyze interviews.

## CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

Three themes will be presented with supporting primary data. Those themes include: (a) The Importance of Prayer and Faith, (b) Marriage as a Top Priority and (c) Father Responsibility.

### **Theme 1: “The Importance of Prayer and Faith”**

Faith was mentioned in all interviews. As fathers expressed their goals and fears for their children, many mentioned times that they prayed for their children and families. When facing difficult situations and problems, most parents expressed a reliance on faith and prayers to help them cope. A father named Nate (pseudonyms have been given to all parents) explained:

I think those who are really deep in our faith know the Lord and I think we know where our strength comes from. We know that we can go down in prayer and ask the Lord to just help us, you know, [to] just hold us and help us through these difficult times.

Reported stressful events ranged from daily hassles and maintenance of the household to critical illnesses of spouses or family members. Prayer was mentioned by respondents as a coping resource in connection with both mundane and profound challenges. Lance said:

I am very weak in many areas of my life so to speak. In our prayers I ask Heavenly Father certain things to help me with... I have to really do that in order to function. You know, it's about my family, about my work, job, everything else, if you have it there in your life that will allow you to see certain things, and make sure you make the right decisions.

When the fathers and their families were faced with difficult decisions such as [prayer] adjustments, school work, discipline, and other parenting issues, they turned to faith and prayer to make it through. Another example of this was offered by a father named Russell who shared a story about his daughter earning a high grade on a math test and her peers. After she did so, her peers questioned her high score. As a father, he felt the need to protect her from the criticism she faced as she excelled when her classmates expected her to fail. Russell explained:

There's not too much parents can do [You can't] say, "Well, I'm going to go up there and kick their butts or go talk to their parents." No, no, no. "I'm going to pray about it. That's all I can do. 'Cause you don't want me to go up there" But [then I say] "God can go up there and you won't know that He's there." You won't see He's there [but He will be there for you]. And I would pray so hard before every math class.

Prayer was mentioned in other stressful challenges fathers experience shared. Various situations encouraged these fathers to seek prayer as a daily routine and collectively involving family member also. Thomas shared:

You know you have to be able to adjust. [You have] to be okay with whatever circumstances... [prayer can] change your whole perspective on life . . . The most stressful event is everyday life, just dealing with life. And as we deal with it our [part] is that we trust in God every day. Making sure you pray and we pray daily. Stress is not part of Christ I just look at [challenges] as an everyday life experience.

Other difficult situations, however, went beyond "every day challenges." One such challenge is the death of a loved one. One mother Yolanda (wife of Nate) shared:

I go back to my mom's death. I think that was the most difficult situation that I've ever had to contend with, and I think it made me realize, first of all, the power of God because that was a situation that was very difficult for me and my family. . . I think knowing I can lean and depend on God and go to Him in prayer has sustained me and my family.

Many fathers said that they turned to a higher power to help them in areas where they needed to be sustained or they viewed themselves as weak. As a provider for the family, these fathers often used faith and prayer as guidance in their own lives. Lance said:

[There have been times when] We needed a lot of fasting and prayer. You [get] answers to prayer and what direction that we need to go. A lot of [times] Scripture, scripture reading [is helpful too] ...It's gotta be during that hard time [that you turn to God].

Lance went on to share how prayer acted as a guide for his family:

Prayer is more than a key to my life, without it I'm nothing. That is one of the things that is special about me. I have to rely on [prayer] to communicate with Father in Heaven, [and He guides] to my life both individually and for my family."

Most of the fathers said that they extended the importance of their faith to their children and made it a point to teach them lessons on religion and reliance on God. Many of the fathers also viewed their relationship with God as a protective factor. In connection to both of these issues, Nate related:

And as far as my children go, I wanted them to have, like I said, a strong faith... because of all the entrapments of life these days with drugs and respect issues and [people who] think that the gun is the solution to their problems, I wanted my children to be on a higher plane. I knew that religion could give them that faith that would keep them steady and strong.

Even in the face of uncertainty, after relocating to another city as a result of Hurricane Katrina, Charlene echoed her husband Thomas' reliance on faith for their family as she said:

You definitely have to depend upon God and you definitely have to have faith, but it gets to the point sometimes [where] you get a little confused, because... I don't know why we are still in Baton Rouge. I don't wanna be here, but I know God has something planned for us...

For Charlene, faith did not necessarily provide the answers, but it seemed to give her hope that answers would come. Some fathers credited their religious upbringing to a key family member who played a significant role in their life, thereby instilling their dependence on prayer and faith. Many reportedly relied on the prayers of others to help them through, before their own faith was strong. Thomas expressed:

Having them (my mother and wife's grandmother) praying for us children [when we were] children coming up. Someone prayed for me. I know that was some of the reasons why I'm still here today. Even with my wife, with both of us being here [today] those [are] blessings tremendous [from the prayers of others].

Fathers expressed appreciation for the lives they spend with their families and frequently credited a higher power for enabling them to be a good fathers and husbands. Will said:

I thank God for my kids and I thank God for my family. They've been my strength, they've been my joy. They've been my happiness. And they've been my life. I'm really just really happy to have them.

Charles also believed his faith made him a better father and husband:

My faith has shown me how to be a better husband to my wife. It's shown me how to be a better father to my kids. When I look at my wife... my faith walk taught me that she is more than just my companion.

While fathers relied on faith in a variety of ways, Mark had to face an extreme situation of caring for his family after his wife was struck by a car and became paralyzed. He had to assume the duties of both parents while his wife was in a coma. Mark's commitment to his God, his wife and his children never died as he maintained a household of children while visiting his wife in the hospital. Mark relied on his faith for his physical strength:

Some days I just [felt] like giving up, but I just kept praying, because my body was wearing down ... coming back and forth to the hospital, and not getting no sleep at all, maybe two hours a day, an hour a day within that twenty-four span.

Mark also expressed his reliance on faith for decisions on how to handle difficult medical decisions during this time:

You can be so much in shock. You talk to the doctor[s], but you ain't familiar with all their names. They come to me and talk to me but I wasn't hearing them because my mind was focused on my wife and stuff like that. [the doctors gave me bad news but] the good Lord told me, He said, "Just believe in Me and let Me handle it."

Mark thanked God as his wife began to get better and prayed for strength to continue to provide for his family:

I wasn't going to work 'til they told me she would be all right. That's when I started going. And she started getting better and I thanked Heavenly Father for all that and I told Him, "Just now give me some strength that I can go to work and try to start providing and focus on her coming home.

Fathers used their faith to gain perspective on life. When other things may not have been going as well as they hoped or daily hassles became overbearing, fathers turned to their faith for

hopeful futures and grateful pasts. Charles similarly connected the importance of faith and family responsibility in his summary that:

I thank God for everything that's going on in my life and my kids' life. You look across the seas in different lands and there's kids that ain't got nothing to eat, ain't got nothing to drink, no clothes, no place to call home. But [I tell my kids] you have that and we take it for granted... Be thankful for what you have. Be thankful.

As fathers relied on faith and prayer, they also credited their marriages and marriage partners for the decisions they continued to make as fathers. These fathers offered deeper meanings in connection with their faith as well as the commitment to their marriage. Theme 2 discusses how marriage helped these fathers enhance their levels of involvement.

### **Theme 2: "Marriage as a Top Priority"**

Several fathers referred to their wives as a key strength in their efforts in being a better father and man. Fathers and mothers shared strengths they perceived in their spouses and the changes they have seen in their spouses as time has progressed. These parents often spoke of deeper meanings in their marriage, how they prayed for their spouse both in their presence and when they were not around, and how important communication was in their relationship. The vow to be committed to each other resonated among the participants. They talked about activities they did as a family and as a couple. Respondents often laughed when relating happy moments and times they shared.

When fathers are highly committed to their spouses, they tend to be committed to their children. Thus, marital commitment has effects beyond the ties between husband and wife. Russell expressed his vow to his wife as follows:

You have to make marriage number one. Or its number two 'cause your relationship with God should really be number one. . . So that's the way I look at it, that it's a [top]

priority. You know, people who have nice cars, they change the oil every 1800 miles... Maintenance [is key in a great marriage too], being able to take care of one another.

Many fathers looked to their wives for inspiration and reported feelings of motivation from the way their spouses interacted and cared for their children. Tony reported:

The reality was I was strengthened more at home watching her impart to them than I ever would have been sitting at a conference spending whatever amount of time I spent there. That encouraged more and more to see I was in the right place. I have the right woman in my life. There is no reason to leave. There was just no reason to make a decision to do anything other than to believe that this is what God has planted into my life. I was strengthened; I gained value; and gained character just by watching her and how she imparted to her children.

Tony's wife, Anita, shared lessons taught by her parents and how it affected her and Tony's roles as parents:

One [of the examples I learned from my parents] was that my parents were very clear on the role of the children in the connection with marriage. I knew from a young child that I was not a part of my parents' marriage [there were boundaries there I was not to cross] Them parenting me was another relationship! [Also], I was aware that their parenting was influenced by the response of their partner.

As reported by the fathers and mothers interviewed, marriage had a bidirectional influence on their children. Several parents expressed the joys of parenthood in direct connection with their marriage. When asked how their marriage would differ if they had no kids, Alvin responded:

We started to toy with the idea [of] did we really want to have kids? And we both decided to have kids. At that point, it changed our lives. We had to redirect all our thinking as necessary. We had to look at what's best for our children and how we wanted to raise them. Again it takes a lot of work. You want to be the best mother and father you can be, you know and so it takes a lot of work.

Although faced with challenges on their jobs and in their households, fathers discussed the encouragement they received from their spouses. Alvin also shared:

With that part of encouragement, working two jobs, doing what you had to do to make ends meet at our early age I think that had a significant toll on me... being the man of the household and wanting to provide for your family and doing whatever is necessary [it's great to] have somebody when times get rough that you can come home and that person's there to support you doing whatever she needs to do make your day a lot easier after a hard day at work... You can't even put it into words.

When asked what things or people help him make it through tough times, Patrick mentioned his wife:

I mean, you always talk to different people, you know, I have friends. But you know anything that's bothering me, anything I'm anxious to discuss; the first person I go to is Lynn [my wife].

Wives were influential in father's lives but so was the way they were parented.

Participants were keenly aware that their marriages influenced their own children. Parents act as their children's first teachers and role models. Tony explained:

The influence of [our children] behavior... obviously is a reflection of the influence of our relationship. And how we portray ourselves to our children... it's all an influence of what has been brought out in the character based on what we have shown in our character [with] them watching us."

Parents viewed their marriage as important to their children's upbringing and happiness.

John also explained his experience of his parent's divorce and how he wants to be the opposite of his parents. He said:

My parents, them splitting up did not help, that was a catastrophe mentally, especially for my sisters. You never want to put kids through that.... Their relationship splitting up had a profound effect on me wanting to maintain my family here. This means something. This has to mean something. It isn't just human beings living here [with me, these are my children]. I'm responsible for them. So I can't leave.

Marriage not only influences positive fatherhood involvement and influences children's behavior, it also influences the African American community. When offering advice to African American couples as a final question in the interview, Tony also expressed:



There is a need to stay together for the sake of the community and for the sake of the family [we need to stay together]. For the family, [for] the community and its wholeness. We have a responsibility to our children we have a responsibility to our community to remain together.

Fathers felt they were responsible for their children, their wives, and for their community.

The commitment to their faith and marriage influence the commitment to their communities and how they interacted with the upcoming generation. Theme 3, next, addresses this idea of responsibility in more depth.

### **Theme 3 – “Father Responsibility”**

Some fathers made references to their own history and backgrounds when discussing their responsibilities as fathers to their children. These fathers conveyed messages regarding the responsibility fatherhood take. Commitment to their families encourages them to set boundaries, provide for, teach, care for, nurture, introduce faith and religious traditions and make their children feel they are important. Russell expressed:

Fathers should save up for their children; they should provide and do that. It's their responsibility and the children should have to save up, to take care of the parents. And that's [effort to care and give] that is a fundamental for us.

As they cared for their wives and children, fathers recalled times when they believed they did not play the role of father and husband well. Russell said:

The key thing is my job is to provide and to love and to make sure that (my daughter) has the things she needs.... I am a better father now [than I used to be]. But to be consistent, even if it's a consistent pain in the neck. [I have learned] I think the one; bottom line is, to love her and to let her know that she is loved. And I am also trying to learn and to try to love her where ever she is [in her life], no matter how hard it is.”

Alvin similarly explained:

Having children and being able to give what knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skills and talents that you have to help them develop the skills and talents that God has

given them has been a real privilege in my life. It shows how strong you are in areas you didn't know you were [strong in].

Alvin also added how his perspective on life changed when his children were born. He expressed the idea of feeling needed:

[I realized] Okay these children need me. So that was part of me. I was truly able to give. It was a sacrifice but at the same time it brought much joy and satisfaction to be able to give to them.

Fathers viewed their relationship with their children as important and most sought to bring them up in a faith-committed lifestyle. They were committed to growing their children in the church community. Nate explained:

I think when you bring your children to church as infants and children and they have Bible study and they go to Sunday School and they learn the Word, it builds that base that I talked about earlier, and I think that growth is more tremendous in that way...

Charlene, wife of Thomas stated the same concept of raising their children in a religious household "We pray together as a family, we teach our children, we rear them up the way God tells us to..." Will saw his commitment to his family as a responsibility to God. His reported goal is to live his life as an example of how his sons should live their lives as well.

I hope [my sons] become better men as a result of the high standards I have placed upon myself. Or that God my creator has placed upon me. And by being an example, by being not afraid to show them love, rather than always trying to be the tough guy...

Tony expressed this same concept in a different way "I was called up to raise my children, [as] for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Fathers expressed the positives of having their families in the care and being able to provide for them. Thomas expressed his commitment to his family as his "benefits":

Two healthy kids not having to go get them out of jail. Being together as a family, [these] are some of the richest most blessed benefits of all.

Although difficult at times, Will expressed the importance of finding the balance of faith and marriage and family life:

Finding that balance was really important, it's important for me and my self-respect, in my faith and then my example for my children. Because I do not want them to go out and get married to somebody and [them] think that they're just supposed to deny their sacred responsibility.

These generative fathers expressed their role of fathers as difficult but rewarding. Many of them shared the challenges they faced as husband and father but also expressed blessings that their families bring them. John's quote seemed to capture this briefly but powerfully:

I like the idea of being a father. I think it's the best thing a man can do. I think it's the best, more important than a job, more important than your friends.

These fathers who valued faith and prayer in their personal lives tended to be highly committed to their wives and marriage and also viewed their responsibility to their families and communities. These fathers reported high levels of involvement in their narratives and drew connections to both their marriages and their investments in their community.

## **CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSION**

This study examined the involvement of African American fathers in strong happy marriages. Using grounded theory, themes emerged from comments and remarks from parents during interviews. Fathers expressed their: (a) reliance on prayer and faith as guidance for their family, (b) appreciation for their marriage and spouse to help encourage them to be better fathers, and (c) regard for their various levels of responsibility to their families. The findings indicate the similarities of involvement among happily married African American fathers. Generativity refers to the idea of nurturing the next generation of children (Connor & White, 2006). The fathers in this study reflected generativity through their narratives of involvement with their families. As these African American fathers continue to provide care for their families, they become role models for their own children and men in their communities. Their dependence on faith and prayer acted as a guide to lessons they taught their children and in their efforts to have a positive their impact on their communities.

Marriage and maternal encouragement influences the level of involvement fathers offer their children (McBride & Rane, 1998). This held true in the present study. Further, men's self-esteem can be affected by the quality of the parental relationship (Allen & Connor, 1997). This study explored how marriage influences fathers' positive involvement with their children as a result of being encouraged by their spouses and realizing the value of their marriage.

Fathers in this study committed themselves to their responsibility despite the challenges they faced as African American men. Many even responded positively and constructively to the hardships they experience in the lessons they taught their children. The fathers included in this study focused on the commitment to their responsibility to their families. These fathers

discovered various ways to identify the importance of their responsibility to their families but all remained involved due their reliance on faith and encouragement in their marriages.

Through meaningful expressions of family life, fathers in this study share their experiences of becoming generative fathers and focusing on their responsibility to their families. They share the importance of protection and their desire for their children's success like "Russell" who took pride in his daughter's accomplishments in school and wanted to protect her from the negative comments from her peers. The voices of these fathers offer a glimpse into the future of opportunities in African American communities. Their dedication and sacrifices resonates through "Mark's" narrative as he describes his commitment to his wife and family after her accident and medical conditions.

The importance of their commitment to their families encourages other young men to exemplify this type of commitment as well. They strive to work hard in their relationships with their children and their wives such as "Alvin" who shares the importance of being strong for his kids. Their stories influence their children and friends of their children that this type of father figure still exists. Whether directly connected or universally mentioned, these fathers show that there are Black men who value their marriages, who rely on their faith and who views their responsibility to their families as a priority in their lives. "Tony," a father in the study, expresses the importance of staying connected to his family for the sake of the community around him. These fathers express the joy they feel in caring for their families. Despite challenges and difficulties they may face, fathers such as "Alvin" explain the joy and satisfaction his family brings him daily.

While the media continues to focus on lack of child support and absent men in African American communities, the fathers in this study show that paternal involvement does exist.

They offer pride to the Black men's history as they have struggled to be viewed as present figures of importance in their households. They begin legacies and set standards for today's fathers as role models and leaders. They are responsible for extending their goals and values to their children. Future generations of young men and women can learn from, take pride and aspire to follow in their footsteps by providing the best care they can to their families. I plan to pass on the goals and values of my father in providing and caring for my family much like my father did for me.

### **Future Research**

Future research should include diversity among fathers' romantic relationships. Fathers in committed relationships or single custodial fathers may or may not express themes such as prayer and faith or spousal support as an encouragement for being generative fathers. Expanding current research may help us to appreciate positive father involvement among African American communities. The voices of these generative fathers should be heard by policy makers to help create programs that motivate other fathers to be responsible. Future research should build on knowledge surrounding generative fathering among Black families.

### **Limitations**

Although this research identified some factors that influence involvement among residential African American fathers, there were several limitations. Limitations of this study include a small sample size of strong Black marriages of only 11 couple interviews (N=22 participants). The sample only included parents who were identified as having strong marriages in the African American community by leaders. The findings are rich but not generalizable. Indirect influences on parenting involvement were not included in the thematic presentation in

these studies. However this study does support the reliability of the factors that encourage Black residential fathers.

### **Educational or Practical Application**

While the fathers in this study struggle with the challenges of inner city neighborhoods, they still remain committed to their children, their marriages and their communities. Their narratives may serve as a guide to young fathers who have not reached this level of generativity. Programs should be implemented to offer parenting skills, maternal encouragement, continuous support and marriage training for fathers to increase their levels of involvement. As generative fathers continue to care for their communities, they act as role models for less generative fathers. Programs should also be in place to help identify and motivate fathers who may struggle in providing the best care for their families. They create a cycle of positive fathers who are committed to their wives, their families and their communities as well as their own personal development. The children and their friends benefit from having interactions with positive fathers, mothers benefit by having partners who are committed to parenting and the community benefits as more positive male figures emerge. As stated earlier according to Rob Palkovitz, “Fathering roles create a rich and pervasive context for men’s adult development. Good fathering is good for everyone” (2002, p. 5).

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## **VITA**

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